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ABSTRACT

The beginning creative writer usually needs to learn the distinction between creative writing and purely informational or reportorial exposition. This can often be accomplished through writing assignments incorporating the concepts of New Journalism--the method of rendering realistically, from the point of view of an outsider who has temporarily been an insider, the essence of a personality, atmosphere, or lifestyle. An example of such an assignment would be to have a student write about a subject chosen from among well-known people and lifestyles using the following criteria: (1) tell a story moving from scene to scene using as little exposition as possible; (2) record dialogue realistically; (3) use the third-person point of view; (4) record everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, modes of behaving, looks, glances, poses, styles of walking, and other symbolic details indicative of the subject's status. Such assignments help the student writer to develop a personal literary voice and to understand how fiction grows out of personal experience. (AEA)

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The New Journalism: A Transition to Fiction-Writing for Beginning Creative Writers[1]

The beginning creative writer usually needs to learn the important distinction between "creative" writing and purely informational or reportorial exposition. He's unclear about the difference between "creating" and merely "making up," and he needs help in breaking away from conventional habits of observation. Perhaps most of all, he needs to develop skill in "becoming" his characters, as an actor "lives" his role.

Stephen Crane, who in the last decades of the nineteenth century perhaps anticipated the New Journalism, certainly in the New York City sketches, conducts an experiment in this kind of identification, "An Experiment in Misery" (there's also "An Experiment in Luxury" to balance the "night and morning with those cast out"):

> Two men stood regarding a tramp.
>
> "I wonder how he feels," said one, reflectively. "I suppose he is homeless, friendless, and has, at the most, only a few cents in his pocket. And if this is so, I wonder how he feels."
>
> The other being the elder, spoke with an air of authoritative wisdom. "You can tell nothing of it unless you are in that condition yourself. It is idle to speculate about it from this distance."
>
> "I suppose so," said the younger man, and then he added as from an inspiration: "I think I'll try it. Rags and tatters, you know, a couple of dimes, and hungry too, if possible. Perhaps I could discover his point of view or something near it."
>
> . . .
>
> The youth went to the studio of an artist friend, who, from his store, rigged him out in an aged suit and a

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> brown derby hat that had been made long years before. And then the youth went forth to try to eat as the tramp may eat, and sleep as the wanderers sleep.

After supper in a soup kitchen and a night's sleep in a flophouse--these episodes narrated from the inside of the derelict's world looking out, in the local color tradition--the young man returns to his friend.

> "Well, said the friend, "did you discover his point of view?"
>
> "I don't know that I did," replied the young man; "but at any rate I think mine own has undergone a considerable alteration." [2]

Students assigned to carry out a similar experiment, to immerse themselves in the world of a person, or the atmosphere of a place or event, and to record their impressions, often take the first steps toward the kind of projection necessary to write creatively. It isn't necessary for a student to disguise himself, or become an impersonator, or even carry a tape recorder, but simply to do his best to "discover the point of view" or the essence of a subject. This happens almost automatically if he chooses his subject from among the people and lifestyles he has observed closely or knows well from personal experience, and if he follows the criteria for the practice of New Journalism set forth by Tom Wolfe (here I condense the four points):

1) Tell a story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to "historical narrative" (encyclopedia-style exposition)
2) Record dialogue realistically. Wolfe says that realistic dialogue involves the reader more completely than any other single device, and establishes and defines character more quickly and effectively than any other device.
3) Use third-person point of view. Present every scene through the eyes of a particular character, giving the reader the feeling of being inside the character's

mind and experiencing the emotional reality of the scene as he experiences it. (This technique calls for an open-minded, inductive, non-judgmental role on the part of the observer-writer.)

4) Record everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of travel, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details--details indicative of "status life," the pattern of behavior and the possessions through which people express their position in the world, or what they think it is, or what they hope it will be. [3]

For illustration, students read an example from Wolfe, such as the following passage from his essay on Junior Johnson, "The Last American Hero," in The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby:

> Sunday! Racing day! There is the Coca-Cola sign out where the road leads in from the highway, and hills and trees, but here are long concrete grandstands for about 17,000 and a paved five-eighths mile oval. Practically all the drivers are out there with their cars and their crews, a lot of guys in white coveralls. The cars look huge . . . and curiously nude and blind. All the chrome is stripped off, except for the grilles. The headlights are blanked out. Most of the cars are in the pits. The so-called "pit" is a paved cutoff on the edge of the infield . . . . Every now and then a car splutters, hocks, coughs, hocks a lunga, rumbles out onto the track itself for a practice run. There is a lot of esoteric conversation going on, speculations, worries, memoirs:
>
> "What happened?"
>
> "Mother--condensed on me. Al brought it up here with him. Water in the line."
>
> "Better keep Al away from a stable, he'll fill you up with horse manure."
>
> ". . . they told me to give him one, a creampuff, so I give him one, a creampuff. One goddam race and the son of a bitch, he melted it . . . "
>
> ". . . he's down there right now pettin' and rubbin' and huggin' that car just like those guys do a horse at the Kentucky Derby. . . ." [4]

In doing this assignment the student sketches from life, as he might during the first months of a drawing class. Skillful description is, of course, basic to good writing of any kind, and is usually one of the first assignments the composition instructor makes, but the usual responses are mostly visual accounts, conventionally treated. This description requires a dramatic, or "scenic" approach, and calls upon the individual perception of the writer to encounter and interact with the subject. This temporary merger constitutes an act of imagination, a leap of the self into the other entity, an exercise of what Keats called "negative capability." This is the creative act necessary before a writer can bring viable characters into existence.

Having described a person, place or event in this manner, the student has acquired practice in the composition of scenes, dialogue, point of view, and selection of detail, all in one assignment. If successful, he will also have evoked for the reader an authentic experience.

Few students have previously tried this approach, but none who catch on fail to experience major breakthroughs in content and style. In some cases, fictional triumphs occur at the end of the course which can be directly attributed to the influence of the New Journalism experiment.

Fortunately, the use of Wolfe's methods has never resulted in mimicry of Wolfe. New Journalists seem to retain distinctive individual narrative personalities despite the use of a shared formula. Because the student draws on his own resources and observations, he writes like himself--in the case of the novice, a previously undiscovered self, a more sensitive and resonant instrument than he suspected himself to be.

He is on the way to developing his own literary voice, and begins to understand how fiction and even fantasy grow out of personal experience.

FOOTNOTES

[1] The term New Journalism as used here refers to the method (popular in the 1960's) of rendering realistically, from the point of view of an outsider who has temporarily been an insider, the essence of a personality, atmosphere or lifestyle, as practiced by Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson, Truman Capote, George Plimpton, Rex Reed, Norman Mailer, Gay Talese. It has, of course, many precedents i the history of literary realism and impressionism.

[2] The New York City Sketches of Stephen Crane, ed. R. W. Stallman and E. R. Hagemann (New York University Press, 1966), pp. 33-34, 43.

[3] The New Journalism, ed. Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 31-33.

[4] Tom Wolfe, The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby (New York: The Noonday Press, 1965), pp. 139-140.